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Scrapbooks: Documents of Everyday Life

By Lisa Wood, Ohio Historical Society

Introduction

A coworker recently asked me how I fell in love with old photographs. Without hesitation I told her how I loved to look at a scrapbook my grandmother assembled for my father, which included all of his class pictures, group pictures of his Cub Scout pack and sports teams, his varsity letters and Eagle Scout award, and news clippings about his childhood activities. The scrapbook was a window to the past through which I could look and see the boy my father used to be. Working in a repository that contains hundreds of archival collections from private individuals, organizations, and businesses, I have examined, described, and cataloged many scrapbooks. Each carefully assembled book is a unique window into the past life of an individual or group.

Our patrons increasingly are looking for personal meaning in historical documents. They may be impressed by a document or object created or used by a famous person, but they are just as interested in seeing examples of how people in the past were similar to or different from themselves. Scrapbooks, with their eclectic array of photographs, theater programs, match books, dried flowers, news clippings, baby bracelets, lockets of hair, and other odds and ends, can be highly engaging. As part of a family collection, we recently received the college scrapbooks of a woman who attended The Ohio State University in the 1960s. She went to every dance, joined every club, and saved mementos of everything in her scrapbooks. As an archivist, I consider the scrapbooks valuable documentation of the student experience at a large public university during the baby boom generation. The patrons that I have shared the scrapbooks with are amazed at what she saved and what they can learn about being a student at that time.

The dark side of scrapbooks is that their diverse physical components make them among the most difficult types of documents to conserve. Store-bought scrapbooks were mass produced from poor-quality materials, and homemade scrapbooks often were assembled from recycled materials. The conservation treatments that many scrapbooks could benefit from—repairing rips in pages, reattaching enclosures, removing metal fasteners, and rebinding—require a great deal of time and often are best handled by trained conservators. However, there are important steps that archivists can take without professional conservation assistance.

Storage and Handling

The first priority for preserving scrapbooks is to store them properly. One of the most effective measures to stabilize and protect scrapbooks is simply to put them in boxes.¹ Boxes protect them from light and dust and keep all of the pages and enclosures together in one container. Boxes should not be significantly larger than the scrapbooks they house because the volumes will slide around inside when they are moved. Boxes also should not be too small. Box lids should fit properly, and it should not require tugging to remove a scrapbook from a box. Given their many variations in width and depth, custom-made boxes for scrapbooks can be very convenient. If a scrapbook has loose enclosures, they can be placed in an acid-free envelope or folder in the box with the scrapbook. Additionally, scrapbooks can be wrapped with acid-free paper and tied with cotton twill tape to hold pages and enclosures in place.¹

It generally is recommended that scrapbooks, particularly larger volumes, be stored flat. This provides the most support for volumes with fragile bindings and brittle pages and keeps the volumes closed.² When stored upright, gravity can pull on enclosures, which frequently are heavier than the pages to which they are attached. When examining scrapbooks, they also should be laying on flat surfaces. Wearing gloves is often recommended, but may reduce manual dexterity to turn pages.

Description

The second priority for scrapbook preservation is describing the contents. A detailed finding aid of the content and subject matter of a scrapbook prevents wear and tear on the volume because researchers can determine if there are materials of interest inside without physically handling the volume. Whether to describe the scrapbook as a whole or to describe the content page by page is a judgment call.³ Time and staff resources available are obvious considerations in making decisions about the level of description to employ. Another consideration is the uniformity of the content of the scrapbook. A scrapbook that is primarily filled with one type of enclosure, such as photographs or news clippings, may be easier to describe as a whole than a scrapbook that contains an assortment of enclosures.³

Should It Be Unbound?

The decision to unbind a scrapbook is significant because it may not be easily reassembled. It should be determined

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on a case-by-case basis if this is necessary. In some cases, the binding may be in such bad shape that the decision has been made for us. I once processed a collection of albums that had been stored in a damp environment. The front and back covers had absorbed a lot of moisture; they were warped, stained, and some exhibited mold growth. As they were plain, unstamped covers from mass-produced albums, it was a fairly easy decision to unbind the volumes and to dispose of the covers. I numbered the album pages to maintain their original order and put them in archival folders interleaving the pages with acid-free paper.

In another collection, I found several scrapbooks in which clippings, programs, and other items were piled inside the volume, but nothing was arranged in any discernable order; items were protruding from the scrapbook and nothing was actually attached to the pages. The scrapbooks were mass produced items with little artifactual value. I decided that little context would be lost if I put the enclosures in folders.

In general, I tend to lean away from unbinding or disassembling scrapbooks because the majority of the contents are best understood in their original context and original order. It is a good idea to establish criteria for whether to unbind or disassemble scrapbooks. I consider the physical condition of the binding and covers, the artifactual value of the scrapbooks themselves, and the time available for processing the materials. If the decision is made to unbind a scrapbook, it is a good idea to number the pages lightly with pencil to maintain the original order.³

Reformatting

Copying scrapbooks is an excellent method to reduce handling of and potential damage to delicate volumes. If the decision is made to unbind or otherwise disassemble a scrapbook, reformatting is also a method for preserving the order of the pages and unique arrangement of the enclosures.⁴ Microfilming is one option for reformatting, but has its drawbacks. One issue is the cost; many institutions do not have the staff and equipment to microfilm materials in house, necessitating the use of outside vendors. A second drawback is that microfilming is usually done in black and white. Scrapbooks often contain colorful ephemera, such as greeting cards and postcards. Viewing them only in black and white could be a disappointing experience for many researchers.

Another option is photocopying or scanning scrapbooks page by page and collating the copied pages in their

original order. The photocopying or scanning can be done in color. The new scrapbook can be conveniently viewed by patrons without the use of machinery, and they can still have the traditional experience of browsing the scrapbook pages. Ideally, the copying would be done on an overhead book scanner that allows the volume to lay flat. If it is necessary to photocopy or scan the pages face down, then the scrapbook should be unbound. Pressing a bound scrapbook face down on a photocopy machine or scanner bed could easily damage the binding or individual pages.

Conclusion

Making scrapbooks continues to be a popular hobby. Seeing a scrapbook that was created long ago, but still resembling present-day scrapbooks in terms of subject matter, is fascinating for patrons. While they are challenging to preserve, simple and cost-effective steps can significantly extend the useful life of scrapbooks. Digitization has provided a wonderful method for reformatting scrapbooks and making them more accessible than ever before. The ephemeral nature of scrapbooks and the everyday items they frequently contain is really their strength as historical documents, not their downfall.

Notes

1. Ivan Hanthorn, "Tips on Preserving Scrapbooks," *Helpful Tips for Preserving Your Precious Documents and Memorabilia*, 19 May 2004, <<http://web.grinnell.edu/individuals/stuhrr/icpc/scrapbookstip.html>> (17 April 2009).
2. State Library and Archives of Florida, "Protect Your Historic Scrapbooks," 2004, <<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/archives/preservation/Scrapbook/scrapbook2.cfm>> (17 April 2009).
3. Brian Meggitt, "Scrapbooks: Challenges and Opportunities for Archivists and Preservation Librarians," 19 April 2006, workshop at the Society of Ohio Archivists conference.
4. Local Records Preservation Program, Missouri State Archives, "Care of Scrapbooks," *Conservation Services Notes*, February 2003, <<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/localrecs/conservation/notes/scrapbooks.asp>> (17 April 2009).